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C O N F I D E N T I A L ADDIS ABABA 002034

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MELES' RETIREMENT PLANS - ONE MORE TERM

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission, Michael C. Gonzales for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In response to a direct question by Admiral (ret.) Bill Fallon on August 13 on his future, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi responded that although he would like to retire at the end of his current term in office, "it looks like the (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front - EPRDF) party is going to let me down." The Prime Minister noted that the EPRDF will render a final decision at its party congress in September 2009. This clarification comes after months of public statements by the Prime Minister noting his desire to step down from the premiership.

¶2. (C) While Meles effectively did acknowledge that he will run again in the 2010 national elections, he also volunteered that "there is broad consensus within the party that it will be time for us in the old guard to hand over the reins to the younger generation by the end of the next term." Meles clarified that the turn-over in senior party officials will not likely come in a mass exit, but rather than over the course of the 2010-2015 term the older generation of ruling party leaders would slowly step aside.

¶3. (C) The Prime Minister's direct confirmation was confirmed separately by founder of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Sebhat Nega. The Political/Economic Counselor asked Sebhat's views of the Prime Minister's future over a private lunch on July 13. Almost laughing at the question, Sebhat stated "he's not going anywhere."

COMMENT

¶4. (C) These confirmations from a senior party insider, and the Prime Minister himself, confirm our analysis that, despite his comments to the press, Prime Minister Meles will remain in place through the next election, if not beyond. In light of the ruling party's style of control, we expect that the party will elaborately groom an heir to Meles, in a fashion that is very apparent, well before subjecting that heir to an electoral contest. End Comment.

MEECE